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ABSTRACT

The community power structure in the small rural community is examined in terms of how social power is obtained. Also reviewed are methods employed in identifying the power holders in a community, the political nature of the school, the role of the superintendent, and political ties of school administrators with respect to educational decision-making. The document concludes with a brief discussion of implementation of change within a school or community and public acceptance or rejection of that change. (EL)

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RELATIONSHIP OF POWER AND AUTHORITY IN RURAL AREAS

(Prepared for a conference on Appalachia to be held at the University of Tennessee in April of 1971)

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RELATIONSHIP OF POWER AND AUTHORITY IN RURAL AREAS

In his 1967 article "Power Actors and Social Change," Ronald Powers (1) defined social power as "the capacity to control the actions of of others." Powers further stated that the method by which control is achieved is the important consideration. Charles P. Loomis (2), in Social Systems, identified three means of control: (a) authority--power given the individual by the system (i.e. an office, whether elected, appointed, or delegated); (b) influence--the amount of power an individual has by virtue of control of, or access to, resources relevant to the proposed social action; and (c) unlegitimized coercion--the control of others via methods outside accepted social norms. Loomis stated that the capacity to influence resides in the individual and his abilities, not in the role itself. He further noted that influence may be due to such factors as wealth, reputation, skill in handling people, special knowledge of a social system, or reciprocal obligation.

It seems safe to say that power actors in a given community will relate to all or some of the other power wielders, thereby forming a community power structure. It has been observed that, in some communities, there may exist several different focal points of power rather than one.

The findings of Mitchell and Moore (3), in their identification of influentials and how they are organized, supported a point held by such workers as Vidich and Bensman that only a small number of influentials--closely linked by informal and overlapping organizational membership--constitute a power structure in small communities in low-income rural counties.

The Political Nature of the School

The American people, in general, consider the public school system to be politically nonpartisan and, ideally, it should be nonpolitical. Gehlen (4), in The Political Aspects of Small Town and Rural Schools, referred to the schools as being "creatures of the state" because they are supported by tax monies. As a result of being tax-supported, the schools are often subjected to political pressures from various groups within a community. Gehlen further noted that any person having an interest "in the politics of education in any given type of community must first have some appreciation of this general political setting in which the school operates."

Gehlen went on to say that the elected school board generally makes the policy, but then most of the operational oversight and concerns are delegated to the superintendent. The political nature of a school is usually determined by a group of persons elected to the school board. They have the policy function with regard to such areas as hiring of personnel, expenditure of funds, and curriculum. This approach has been more or less left up to the professional persons, but there is a consensus that parents and local community members should concern themselves and radiate some influence in these areas. It is generally assumed that the local school board and the hired personnel are open to persuasion and control by the local citizen.

Influencing the local board, says Gehlen, may be done in various ways:

> Organizing to "throw the rascals out" on election day is the time-honored democratic means in situations where boards are elected. However, elections are staged only periodically; and as terms are normally staggered, any

> one election may not allow a total shift in control or philosophy. In actual practice, it is rare for a school board election to arouse enough public interest over its policies for the election to be considered a public referendum. Yet the potential for public recall remains a fact of life; and no election official can entirely ignore it.

Indirect pressures may be brought to bear on public officials and their appointees by persons who do not hesitate to use implied or direct threats to have personal wishes carried out. A study by Gross (5) dealt with the particular problem of the superintendent having to give some preferential attention to individual requests.

In addition, Gehlen (6) noted that there are groups which are essentially formed to forward some political, economic, or religious goal and which see the school as one arena for propagating their own interests. Gehlen added that while pressures such as these are not to be ignored if one is concerned about decision-making and power in the school, many would argue that these pressure groups and individuals do not really deal with the question of who wields the power in or over the school system. And many would argue that the real power is in the community power structure. For this reason, this paper will devote a major portion of its discussion to the power structure in small communities.

The Community Power Structure

A great deal of attention has been given the smaller communities and their decision-makers since Hunter's Community Power Structure (7) was published. This seems to imply that communities are basically run by "an invisible government." Control is accomplished by the economically dominant members of the community passing down decisions and responsibilities to a second level of decision-makers made up of people

in lesser economic circumstances, professionals, and public figures. The fact that the power wielders never operate in the open seems to authenticate the existence of a "monolithic power structure." Vidich and Bensman (8) discussed the invisible government of Springdale, a village of approximately 1,000 in a township of 2,500. Other researchers (9) have purported to find such power organizations in communities of 100,000.

It may be beneficial at this point to examine the methods employed in identifying the power holders in a community. According to Gehlen (10),

> The usual technique employed is to begin with a panel of people assumed to be knowledgeable about their community or at least some specific aspect of it and ask them who has the power and how issues are settled. Those who are nominated are then interviewed and asked to identify the powerholders. This process is continued until a virtual consensus is reached.

In the study of identification of influentials in ten small Ohio communities in parts of twenty-eight counties of the Appalachian region, Mitchell, Given, and Schriner (11) used this "reputational" method of identifying community leaders. In each case, a panel of knowledgeable citizens was asked to respond to the question: "Who are the persons who can cause things to happen or can keep things from happening in this community?" Then, persons mentioned two or more times by the panel were interviewed. Information was obtained using a pretested schedule containing sections relating to personal data, organizational membership, visiting patterns, and community leadership. Data from the schedule were then compared with county data regarding occupations, place of residence, education, income, and organizational membership.

In a discussion of research methodology, Gehlen (12) reported that

the reputational method of ascertaining power structure has been charged with being predisposed to yield a monolithic structure (as opposed to a pluralistic one) and that, with this method,

> there is a great deal of confusion due to the failure to separate the potential for power, the reputation of having power, and the actual exercise of power....Indeed, the whole notion of pluralism rests on the assumption that there are several different people who are competent to come to the fore when different issues are at stake. It has also generally been found that most issues bring forth competing groups, each with its own preferred solution. This assumes a fairly heterogeneous community.

Gehlen also called attention to the fact that a pluralistic-based distribution of power has been most prevalent in medium to large sized cities. Although the same characteristics could be found in the small community, Gehlen noted that they are more likely to be associated with a larger community. However, no matter what methodology was used or what assumptions were made, research has very little to offer regarding widespread distribution of power on any issue. The actual exercise of power is seen to be limited to a very small percentage of the general population.

The Superintendent

One of the primary concerns of this paper is to view the activities of a school superintendent as a decision-maker and, in some respects, as a power holder in a rural community. The school superintendent, as portrayed by Gehlen (13), is an administrator of one of the largest enterprises in most communities, particularly so in a small community. Research up to this point, however, has shown that the superintendent has a very limited power base of his own and is not considered one of the top influentials in the community.

In a recent comparative study of three communities in the Northwest,

Pellegrin (14) found that general influentials nominated by the reputational method as being important in education seemed to be less involved in education than the nominations data would lead one to believe.

A power group's seemingly unconcerned attitude does not mean that school officials are free to act on their own. Some issues the school becomes involved with are public issues and therefore have a tendency to bring out persons to do battle who otherwise would not become involved in any other type of community power struggle (15).

A monograph on Appalachia by Donohew and Parker (16) discussed the findings of Harold Plunkett, who reported that most high school principals and a few male teachers were very closely tied with local politics and the local establishment. It was also found that only a small fraction of teachers were integrated into community activities outside the school. Probably the most important factors revealed were that attitudes indicated strong resistance to change among the local public office holders and that public officials were disinclined to see anything wrong with local institutions and had reservations with respect to outsiders. Donohew and Parker noted that these observations are consistent with findings of other observers having extensive experience with the Appalachian people.

In discussing Pellegrin's study of three Northwest communities, Gehlen (17) stated that those who were influential in the sphere of education, by and large, were those in official positions related to the schools: the superintendent, his top assistants, the school members; however, board members were rarely found to be influential or active in other community

affairs. Again, Gehlen made the distinction that

> if one is talking of power as the right and ability to make administrative decisions about day-to-day functioning, curriculum, discipline, or even personnel problems, then there is little doubt that by and large this authority is vested in and exercised by the board of education and the school officials--the superintendent and those to whom he delegates specific authority.

Although there are certain pressures which superintendents experience, most research reports indicate that the power structure very seldom attempts to apply pressure regarding educational decisions. Nonetheless, Gehlen (18) listed, in order of frequency, those groups or individuals believed to be most mentioned by superintendents as pressure groups; parents or the PTA, individual school board members, teachers, taxpayers' associations, town finance committees or city councils, politicians, business or commercial organizations, individuals influential for economic reasons, and personal friends.

Concerns of the Power Structure

To substantiate the major concerns of the power elite, Mitchell and Moore (19) described the power holders in a small Ohio community:

> these men are involved in decision making for health facilities, highways, and all public facilities and services. They are the primary "manipulators" or "regulators" of industrial promotion efforts plus business developments along "Main Street." Their influence touches every citizen of the community through these indirect activities.

Mitchell and Moore also noted that social decisions appeared to be influenced by men in this group because of their participation in the various organizations and groups in the community. In addition, the power of these men was not challenged or reduced because continued outflow of human and economic resources in this particular small community reduced

the likelihood of a recent arrival moving into this elite group composed of long-time county residents, 80 percent of whom were born in the county.

Change and the Educator

Roland Pellegrin (20), in An Analysis of Sources and Processes of Innovation in Education, took a comparative look at the teacher and the superintendent in the area of implementation of innovative ideas. He found that the teacher is expected to be innovative, but largely within the confines of the classroom.

> The superintendent, on the other hand, is currently viewed by researchers as the key figure in the innovation process at the local level. Structural adaptations which are necessary for change to be introduced effectively depend upon the decisions of the superintendent and his top assistants.

Pellegrin did not see school board members as innovators but viewed them as "inhibitors" rather than "initiators." He described the role of the layman as that of encouraging the local educator to adopt a nationally publicized innovation, and he characterized the active layman, in general, as coming from the middle class, being pro-education, and representing the highly educated, high-income community segment.

According to Gehlen (21), any innovation adopted by the local school community is more likely to be introduced and implemented through official school personnel, particularly through the superintendent. In discussing acceptance of change, Gehlen also noted that changes should be introduced slowly through existing institutions and should deal with material or technical aspects of the present society rather than its basic values.

Four factors that may be related to public acceptance of change in education were listed by Goldhammer (22):

(a) The image the public holds of the person advocating the change (usually the superintendent in the educational setting) is important. In order to gain the confidence and respect of the community, he must be accepted as an authority on education and must maintain a certain amount of loyalty to the values and goals of the community.

(b) The change agent must be aware that the public's image of the organization and its purposes will have some relevance as to whether future changes will be accepted within the organization.

(c) The change agent's proposed change should be direct and fully explanatory as to its significance and advantages for the citizens. If the proposed change appears vague and is not directed toward community needs, the public is not likely to favor it.

(d) The small community, with its more tradition-bound and provincial outlook, is more likely to be resistant to change than the larger community.

In the foregoing, it is presupposed that the public has the choice of rejecting or accepting change when it is introduced.

In summary, actual power structure studies of the small towns are not plentiful, and few of the studies about power even mention education. This leaves the impression that "the power structure, qua power structure, if such exists, is not vitally concerned with what

happens in the schools " (23).

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